

THE EMANCIPATION ORGASM: SWEETBACK IN

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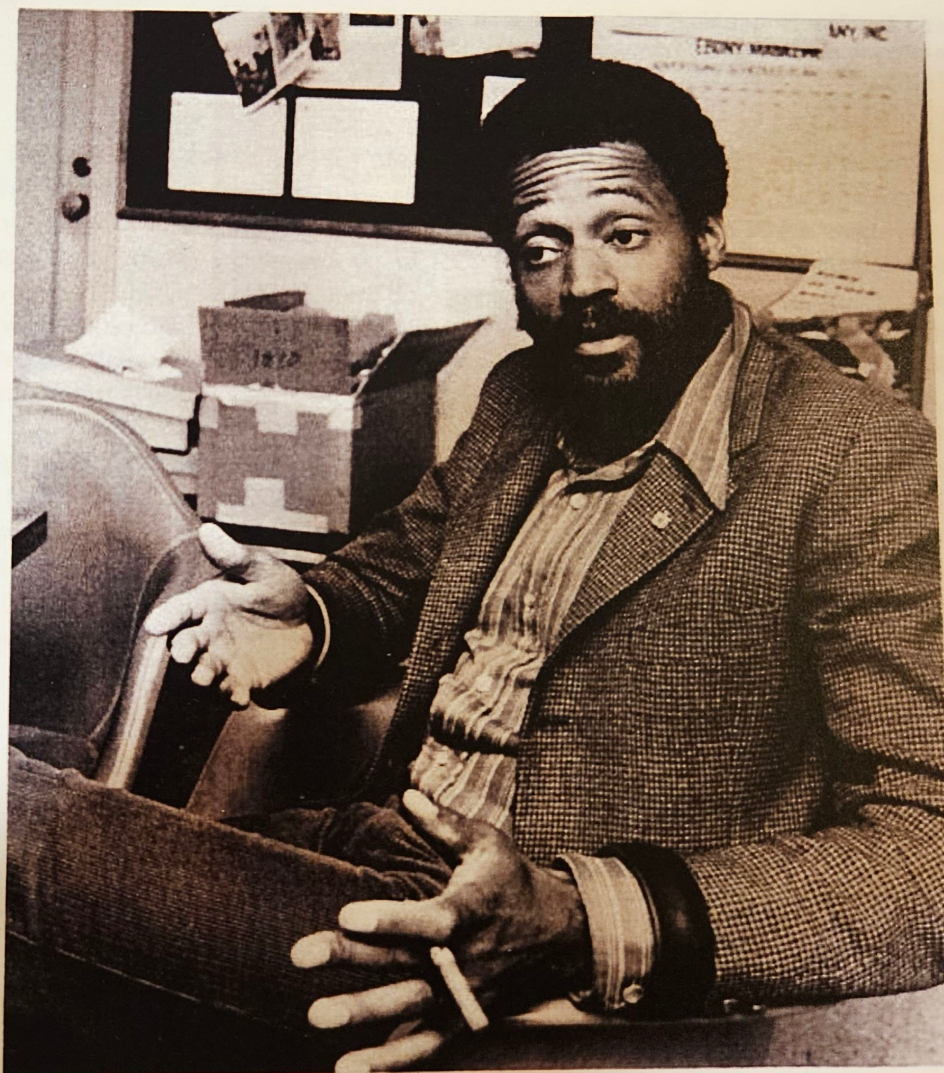
There is, as I say, humor—black and white—in this, and in the further fact that many Negroes, even some Negroes who are very black, dig *Geraldine* and *Sweetback* and insist that they are the distilled essence of the black aesthetic.

As *Geraldine* said, "What you see is what you get."

And what you deserve, really.

For such a preposterous reversal of images could only happen in a community without a sure sense of the meaning of its experience and the overwhelming power of electronic and film media to distort and debase even the best artistic intentions.

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a single black radio station has a resident film or movie critic. To make matters worse, black intellectuals and writers—including the author—rarely descend from the Olympian heights of the theater and the novel to the grubby terrain of the popular arts.

This is, as you can see, an alarming situation, which lends itself to all kinds of manipulation and mischief. And what follows is neither a movie review nor an attempt to score points but a desperate plea for an open dialogue on the symbolic schizophrenia of our times.

Such a dialogue is necessary because of the widespread symbolic confusion in the black community. This confusion grows out of the passionate upheavels of the Black Revolution which destroyed all moorings and pushed us precipitately out to sea. And now, in the wake of that great event, we find ourselves drifting in deep and uncharted water, a long way

from the safe and sterile harbors of the past and miles away from the distant shores of our destiny.

Let us tread water for a spell at this point, for an understanding of what we are doing and why we are doing it is necessary to prevent a collective disaster. The essence of our present maneuver is clear: We are trying to clear away the symbolic debris of the white man's attempt to control and define black reality. For more than 300 years now, white people have presumed to tell black people who they were and what they should want. In order to hide black people from themselves, white people created those enduring black stereotypes of

the Black Stud, the shrew-like Sapphire, the flip Tigress, the Happy Darky, and the bad Nigger. In the white worldview, black people were sexy, violent, emotional, children of the soil and of nature. They were a drinking, dancing, wenching lot, a little thievish perhaps and consummate con artists but withal warm-hearted and full of fun, a watermelon in one hand, a razor in the other, and an ace of spades up the sleeves. It was this image which informed the Amos 'n' Andy Show, as author Larry King (*Confessions of a White Racist*) has pointed out. "Who does not readily recognize the white man's nigger as represented by the [Amos 'n' Andy] cast?" he asked. "Lawyer

Brilliant advertising campaign made movie a No. 1 money-maker. Some black artists called film "trash." In scene from film, Van Peebles, portraying Sweetback, uses sexual powers to defeat white female leader of motorcycle gang. Black groups have criticized sex presentation in scene above.

SWEETBACK *Continued*

Calhoun pretended to a literacy so obviously impossible in a black man that he could only spout quasi-legalisms in the most unintelligible terms; Andy was a cum laude graduate of the

tha
and
Suc



Geraldine, the flip, saucy character on The Flip Wilson TV show, presents, in opinion of some critics, a negative, stereotyped image of black womanhood. Geraldine is played by star, Flip Wilson.

*that can dance on a flaming world
and make the world dance, too.
Such is the soul of the Negro.*

—W.E.B. DuBois

now to make a clear and black distinction between the white man's sexy and true black sexuality, to make a distinction between white emotivity and free black emotions, to make a distinction between the white patriarchal bag of male posturing and preening and a new form of male-female partnership. In fine, it is our historical responsibility to draw up an inventory of values, separating the black core of our experience not only from white encrustations but also from destructive life styles which had adaptive value and were hence progressive at one stage of our development but which have become regressive and reactionary and impede our forward movement.

Beyond all that, deeper than all that, is the need to break free of all dichotomies. The black genius, as objectified in the spirituals and the blues and jazz, is contra dichotomies. This is, as I said elsewhere, "the essential genius of the black tradition which does not recognize the Platonic-Puritan dichotomies of good-bad, work-play, sacred-profane. This has caused no end of misunderstanding, even among black mythologists, who elaborate, say, a blues mystique as opposed to a spiritual mystique. The black tradition, read right, recognizes no such distinction. The blues are the spirituals, sex is sacrament, God is the devil, and every night is Saturday night."

What I am concerned to emphasize here is that the road forward for black people is backwards and inwards, down the center of that great tradition. And it should be obvious, from what we have said here, that a fatal misunderstanding of the profundity and richness of the black experience lies at the root of the image confusion in the black community.

Because of our misunderstanding of our experience, because of our misreading of the tracks of the black spirit, we are cleft in soul

School of Memorable Malapropism as well as an inordinately sly dog among coveys of loose black ladies; Lightnin' from his office-boy station was so lazy he only reluctantly expended the energy required to breathe; George (Kingfish) Stevens embodied the sum qualities of all bad niggers everywhere—a con man who naturally preferred ill-gotten gains to honest labors, a philanderer under the cold Black Maternalism eye of wife Sapphire, a circus nigger who dug parading in colorful lodge uniforms while pretending to ludicrous titles. . . .”

For most, if not almost all, whites there is always at the back of the mind this image, this myth of the black community as Amos 'n' Andyland where anything goes, where Sapphire and Kingfish and Geraldine and Killer are always partying and screeching at each other on Catfish Row, where—in the words of the white tradition—they do it, honey, right out in the middle of the streets. And King is right when he writes that for thirty years “this popular radio show may have burned the Negro stereotype into white minds more deeply than any other single mass culture influence.”

*. . . art is not simply works of art;
it is the spirit that knows Beauty,
that has music in its soul and the
color of sunsets in its handkerchiefs;*

THE NEGRO stereotype is, in essence, a contrast conception, the negative pole of the familiar white dichotomies of good-evil, clean-dirty, white-black. In the pre-black days, Negroes generally reacted to the white image by defining themselves as counter-contrast conceptions. They tried, in other words, to become opposite Negroes, the opposite, that is, of what white people said Negroes were. This symbolic strategy is being abandoned by post-Watts blacks who are defining themselves as counter-counter-contrast conceptions, as the opposite, in short, of what Negroes said Negroes were. As you can see, there are dangers in that strategy. The danger, put bluntly, is that blacks will go around and around in circles and end up in an old harbor of white cliches, with the mistaken impression that they are discovering new land. Is there a way out of this dilemma? I believe—and the purpose of this paper is to suggest—that there is a way out which is neither a reaction to the white stereotype nor a reaction to the Negro reaction to the white stereotype. That way is to redefine the black image from a perspective free of the pressures of white influences. But in order to do that, we must create free black words, free, that is, of the need to propitiate or to curse white folks, free black words that sculpt new images of the black man, the black woman, and the black child. To speak plainly, it is necessary

and mind. And we whirl around and around, in our extremity, in a symbolic vacuum, striking out blindly at real and imaginary enemies, immobilized by the conflicting demands of contradictory images. This is an intolerable situation, which tears us apart, steals our energy, and mortgages our acts. In this situation, everything—even the words of our own mouths—testifies against us. We denounce white sociologists who libel the black family and then praise poets and artists whose images of black men and women, despite their good intentions, are equally depressing. We denounce the Cadillacs and minks of the black middle class and then praise the Cadillacs and minks of Ali's *lumpenproletariat* army. We praise black womanhood and then make a cult of the black pimps who degrade them.

An ominous manifestation of this schizoid symbolism is the cult of poverty, which romanticizes rats, roaches, heroin, and misery. Instead of painting poverty realistically as an evil imposed by an evil system, instead of probing deep into the root causes of poverty and presenting the appalling human costs of malnutrition, poor houses and lack of capital, some men paint a Rousseau-like picture of poverty as the incubator of wisdom and soul. Instead of telling men that poverty is not to be borne for a moment and that it is a holy duty—Allah requires it, Jehovah requires it,

SWEETBACK *Continued*

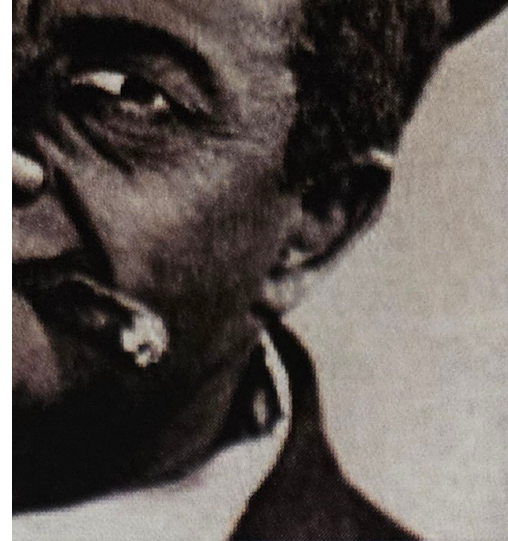
Damballa requires it—to smash a system which permits it, some men foolishly identify the black aesthetic with empty bellies and big-bottomed prostitutes. But to romanticize the tears and the agony of the people is to play them cheap as human beings. The tears are real, the fear of the pimp and the mugger and the landlord is real. The fear of the mother for the boy or girl trapped by an evil system and slowly surrendering to the devils of the street is real. Equally real is the fear and panic of a grown man reduced to a life of idleness and emptiness. One way of not taking that brother seriously as a man is to write bulls**t about how cool he looks standing on that corner with a wine bottle, dying in broad open daylight. But to love the brother is not to take the opposite and equally stupid tactic of condemning him. You don't condemn a man whose society condemns him to poverty. You condemn that society and you create images and symbols that will lead him to his manhood and to his enemies. You don't do that from afar in the mean spirit of American charity. You take your stand with him, realizing that he is not only your brother but that he is, in literal fact, you. It is too often forgotten that Marx came not to save the proletariat but to *change* it. As Jean-Paul Sartre said: "For those whom want, exhaustion, circumstances dispose toward resignation, Marx has very harsh words: they are . . . subhumans. But he doesn't blame or condemn them: he passes a factual judgment on them. . . . This subhuman will become a man only by becoming conscious of his subhumanity. His human reality is thus not in *what he is* but in *his refusal to be such*, that is to say in his revolt against retrogression."

An additional and perhaps even more important source of symbolic confusion in the black community is the tendency on the part of some men to identify black people with the degradation of the conditions imposed on them. This tendency reaches its depth in artistic works based on the equation: Black-

mands, and pull individuals out of themselves *towards* . . .

Directive images are shorthand symbols of the ideals and aspirations of a culture. They tell people who they are; they define roles and apportion tasks. They are maps of the territory and of the soul. They define the paths, the obstacles, the instruments, and the goals. They project ideal images of the ideal relationships between man and man, between man and woman, between man-woman-child. They project, at least in embryo, certain basic ideas about the accumulation and investment of capital, the role of the family and the transmission of values to the next generation.

It is instructive in this connection to note the use of directive imagery in the Nation of Islam. The directive image of the man in the Nation of Islam is an image of a man producing, owning land, supporting a family, creating institutions. The directive image of the woman in the Nation of Islam is of a woman raising children, making a black home, giving children orientation, values and a revolutionary (in terms of the Nation's ideology)



Amos 'n' Andy radio and TV show was major factor in disseminating Negro stereotypes. Some critics believe Sweetback and Gerdal-dine of The Flip Wilson show are modern reincarnations of the old white stereotypes.

was as limited in its way as the core of images of most contemporary groups. For one thing, the images of the old black middle class were too narrowly individualistic and were linked too closely to white interests. What is required now, in my opinion, is a core of directive images, shorn of the patina of archaism, authoritarianism and quietism, and linked to the interests of the black collectivity in a perspective of radical political action. Without such a core of images, an oppressed community cannot make a revolution or anything else. Without such a core of images, a nation cannot be built, Africa cannot be revisited, and African-Americans cannot survive.

Any people who could endure all that brutalization and keep together, who could undergo such dismemberment and resuscitate itself, and endure until it could take the initiative in achieving its own freedom is obviously more than the sum of its brutalization.

—Ralph Ellison

ness=Degradation. Notice, for example, the currently fashionable tendency to elevate the pimp to the status of a folk hero. It is embarrassing to have to say at this late date that pimps—and prostitutes—are European and not African inventions. It is even more embarrassing to note that some enthusiasts are creating elementary school textbooks which present rapes, muggings and dope as the new pedagogic frontier of the black experience.

One of the reasons for the widespread confusion on these points is the absence of a consensus in the black community on the ideal images of the black man and the black woman. We have no sense of what a black man or a black woman should be. And lacking that sense, lacking that common ground of meaning, we cannot get on with the task of creating and projecting directive images to channel the energy and desiring of the people. *Directive images*: these are the words that enlighten us. And what precisely do we mean by that? We mean large and dynamizing images that shape and mold behavior in desired directions. We mean images that point, command, and bind. We mean images that present tasks, make de-

direction. The directive image of the child in the Nation of Islam is of a child doing, going to school, learning skills and values, praising the dead and preparing to avenge them.

On every level, the directive images of the Nation emphasize that to be black is to be productive. The directive imagery of the Nation neither praises nor romanticizes victims. On the contrary, the Nation of Islam pays the victims the highest compliment by asking them to pick up their beds and walk to the front lines of the battle against their tormentors.

We are not concerned here with the political and religious ideology surrounding these images, and the limitations (real or imagined) of the Nation's program (political quietism, religious authoritarianism, Puritanical patriarchy). What concerns us here is the dynamizing core of images, a core of images which is not markedly different from the core of images (productivity, thrift, black enterprise, paternalism) of the old black middle class and the post-slavery artisan class as well as the emerging nations of Africa. But the core of images of the old black middle class

IT IS against this background and within the context of the concepts enunciated above that we must situate the controversy over Melvin Van Peebles' provocative movie, *Sweet Sweet Back's Baadasssss Song*, which is reportedly "the first American film in the black idiom made entirely outside the white power structure's control."

This movie, which, according to some people, is both black and revolutionary, presents the life and times of Sweetback, a stud in a live stag show at a Los Angeles whorehouse. By chance, Sweetback, who is renowned for his priapic powers, witnesses the brutal beating of a black militant by two white policemen. He tries to look the other way but turns finally and hacks the policemen to pieces, using handcuffs as a weapon. He escapes, making his way to Mexico, after three sexual escapades and an interminable chase through the open country and across the desert. At the end of the film, a message flashes on the screen: A BAADASSSSSS NIGGER IS COMING BACK TO COLLECT SOME DUES.

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SWEETBACK *Continued*

According to Mr. Van Peebles, *Sweet Sweetback* is the story of the radicalization of a pimp. The movie stars, he says, the entire black community and presents pictorially for the first time black reality from the black point of view. More than that, *Sweet Sweetback*, according to Mr. Van Peebles, is the black aesthetic. "The film is made," he has said, "from the black aesthetic. It doesn't come soft and I don't act as an ambassador of goodwill. The film doesn't make concessions to the audience, so the audience has to come to it."

In interviews and a book on the movie, Mr. Van Peebles makes the following points about the film:

"I made this film for the black aesthetic. White critics aren't used to that. This movie is black life, unpandered.

"I wanted a victorious film. A film where niggers could walk out standing tall instead of avoiding each other's eyes, looking once again like they'd had it.

"My movie is about a badass man who messes with the Man and wins."

Although most white critics condemned the movie, most black critics were more circumspect. Writing in *The New York Times*, Clayton Riley found the film "objectionable." He noted the film's "relentless vulgarity" and "Van Peebles' apparent obsession with the ruined landscapes of Black life," and the almost total absence of positive black imagery. But he added: "Through the lens of the Van Peebles camera comes a very basic Black America, unadorned by faith, and seething with an eternal violence. It is a terrifying vision, the Blood's nightmare journey through Watts, and it is a vision Black people alone will really understand in all of its profane and abrasive substance."

Another black critic, Sam Washington of the *Chicago Sun-Times*, deplored the film's "shallow characterizations" and Van Peebles' "stiff acting style" but concluded: "*Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* is a grotesque, violent and beautifully honest film that takes no crap from Whitey and his overcivilized hang-ups while it deals with some specifics of the black experience." He added: "... for the first time in cinematic history in America, a movie speaks out of an undeniable black consciousness."

The reasons for the movie's appeal, apart from the sex and violence, are obvious. First of all, and most importantly of all, the movie shows a black man thumbing his nose at society and getting away with it. If *Sweetback* does not, as Mr. Van Peebles claims, win, he at least escapes, and black America, the author included, said: "It's about time." We've had too many movies of suffering blacks performing noble deeds and getting done in at the end. We've experienced enough defeats. What we need now is the steel of hope. *Sweet Sweetback* provides hope of a sort.

The movie also has some striking cinematic touches. The call

not point to revolutionary solutions. For an individual act not articulated with a theory and an organization is not revolutionary. The act may be necessary, it may be spectacular, it may be thrilling—but it is not revolutionary.

The movie poses no questions of social structure. The movie does not show us the enemy. It does not show us the system. It doesn't show us the forces which control the black community. Interestingly enough, the movie tells us nothing about Sweetback, who appears suddenly by a process of spontaneous combustion in a Los Angeles whorehouse at the age of ten or eleven. Watch:

The camera shows us a woman, and another woman, and another, and another. They are lined up (the script says) "like a sort of feminine wild bunch, standing in a circle around a kitchen table. They are half undressed or rather dressed in housecoats, the classic garment of their profession." The women are watching something or someone. The camera pans downwards, showing a "filthy, half-starved nappy-headed boy (Sweetback)" who "is hunched over the kitchen table gobbling food from his plate at an incredible pace, as if eating were going out of style." The boy has apparently just arrived from somewhere. The women have apparently adopted him. The camera moves. Sweetback is delivering towels in the whorehouse. A whore waylays him and rapes him. Young Sweetback, played by Mr. Van Peebles' son, is imprisoned in her legs and before our eyes he turns into a man. The action begins. . . . But wait. Where did Sweetback come from? How did he get to the whorehouse? Who are his parents? What forces shaped and smashed them? Shut up and watch the camera—it's none of your damn business. The camera moves, showing us rabid and racist white policemen, dangerous men who should be identified and resisted. Do these men control the black community? And if so, who controls them? Who controls the men who control the men who control the men who control the police department? Who decides who gets what, when, and how? Who opens and closes the stores and hires and fires in the factories? Who decides on the rate of unemployment and the rate of mortality? Who decides all this? Who runs this system, and what is the name of the system? The moving camera moves, showing us dives and bright lights and winos and cops. And moving on this level, focusing on what every black kid knows, the movie misses a splendid opportunity to raise our consciousness by telling us who to fight, how to fight, and when to fight.

Sweet Sweetback tells us nothing about the nature and dynamics of revolution; it doesn't even tell us how to escape the police. You think this judgment severe? Then dig this sequence: Sweetback has just done in two white policemen. What does he do? He returns in broad open daylight to the whorehouse where he works and lives. He is captured, of course. What did he expect? When you have mortally wounded two white policemen,

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The movie also has some striking cinematic touches. The call and response sequence between Sweetback and the Colored and Black Angels is a master touch of cinematography worthy of a better film and a better setting.

One ought to say this, one serves truth and liberation by saying this, but one also serves truth and liberation by saying that *Sweet Sweetback*, despite its acclaim and despite isolated moments of promise, is a trivial and tasteless negative classic: trivial and tasteless because of the banality of conception and execution; a negative classic, because it is an obligatory step for anyone who wants to go further and make the first black revolutionary film. This is a judgment one wishes that he did not have to make, but it is a judgment that one must make not only because *Sweet Sweetback's* success seems likely to lead to a number of imitative Sons of Sweetback but also because many blacks are suffering under the illusion that the film is revolutionary and black.

Sweet Sweetback is neither revolutionary nor black. Instead of giving us new images of black rebels, it carries us back to antiquated white stereotypes, subtly and invidiously identified with black reality. Instead of carrying us forward to the new frontier of collective action, it drags us back to the pre-Watts days of isolated individual acts of resistance, conceived in confusion and executed in panic.

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Another point, a minor one, but crucial in pinpointing the technical inadequacy of the film, is that Sweetback scampers across the open countryside for several days wearing the same elegant jump suit he was wearing when the police broadcast the first all-points bulletin on him. And I sat there, in the suddenly quiet theater, watching reel after boring reel and wondering when he was going to show some elementary street savvy. It was a gorgeous suit, and one can understand his reluctance to part with it. But prudence and good plotting demanded that he get rid of it after the first white blood was drawn.

Here, as elsewhere, the movie relies on the old John Wayne rugged individualism crap, the great big hero, slaying all the dragons, seducing all the women, swimming across the river, making it alone. At best, this is naïve. At worst, it is reactionary. There are apparently black revolutionary networks which can move people from California to Latin America and Africa and Europe. A real black revolutionary film would have given us

some real lessons on how to manage an escape. It would have told us how brothers and sisters could work together, moving hot cargo from place to place, from city to city, from Underground Railroad station to Underground Railroad station. A real black revolutionary film would have really alarmed the man. Instead of revolutionary tactics, we have an old Mack Sennett chase sequence of a brother hotfooting it in panic down open roads and across the open countryside. They didn't even do it that way in slavery time. An Underground Railroad was operating, even then.

The absence of revolutionary content is dramatized on another level by the differences in the characterization of Sweetback and Moo Moo, the alleged black revolutionary. Now Sweetback, as we have seen, is far from together on the social and tactical levels. But compared to Moo Moo, Sweetback is Mao Tse-tung. In this "revolutionary" and "black" film, the black militant is depicted as a stupid, bumbling incompetent who doesn't even know his way to the bathroom.

Astonishingly, in a film made by a black man from the black aesthetic, we see Moo Moo mostly through white eyes. The white policemen are informed by car radio that there is a shoot-out. The policemen discuss the shoot-out. They talk about Moo Moo. But Moo Moo doesn't speak. Who is he? What is his program? Does he have a plan? A cadre? A vision? We are not told.

The Black movement may be as incoherent and untogether as the movie says. But surely a black revolutionary film would have confronted these problems and would have seized the opportunity to instruct us and exalt us.

One wishes that the movie had made clear that there are no supermen and that a revolution depends not on sexual skill or panicky individual responses but on the organized and deliberate responses of the masses, on their level of consciousness, their organization, their will. In this regard, the differences in the presentation and development of the male hustler in *The Battle of Algiers* and the pimp in *Sweet Sweetback* give cause for concern. The director of *The Battle of Algiers* does not waste his time showing the hustler in bed. He shows us, as Malcolm said, a hustler swinging, becoming a revolutionary and a man. He shows us a hustler rising to the knowledge that revolutions are not made in bed and that oppressed people do not triumph or live by the phallus alone. In *The Battle of Algiers*, the hustler becomes a man. But it is not at all clear what the pimp in *Sweet Sweetback* becomes. Mr. Van Peebles tells us that Sweetback became a radical.

skills and money for black liberation. One wishes that he had confronted black pimps and prostitutes, as Malcolm confronted them in his *Autobiography* and in his life. One wishes, in short, that he had really made a film starring the entire black community.

Someone will say: "You are criticizing the man for not filming *The Battle of Algiers*. How could he film *The Battle of Algiers* when there has been no Battle of Algiers in America?" But that is precisely the point. There *has* been a Battle of Watts in America, and a Battle of Newark, and a Battle of Detroit. A Malcolm lived in Harlem, a King worked in Atlanta, and Angela Davis is in a California prison. And it is impossible to make a revolutionary black film in America without taking these realities into consideration. Somebody asked Mr. Van Peebles once if he had read Malcolm X's *Autobiography*, and he replied: "I haven't read it, I've lived it." One hopes he gets around to reading it. The experience can't hurt, and it might even help.

Yes, Lord, black misery.

—Preacher, *Sweet Sweetback*

BLACK is *not* misery. Black is transcendence of misery and degradation. Did you catch that word? *Transcendence*. A rising above, a soaring. "I got the blues," Duke Ellington's street poet says. "But I'm too damn mean to cry." How do you show that? How do you capture the meaning of this poet of the streets? Do you show the situation that produced the blues? Do you present the blues? Or do you show that unique ensemble, the man in the situation and the situation in the man, all of that, the forces, the conditions and the response to the conditions, culminating in that Spirit that was "too damn" mean to cry?

These are real questions, they are questions of life and art, and it seems to me that Mr. Van Peebles has not given sufficient attention to them in this film. Nor, it seems, has he thought deeply enough about Ralph Ellison's statement that black people are more than the sum of their degradation.

Nothing indicates this better than the fact that there is not a single positive black character in the film. Not a single man or woman coping with his situation as a man or woman. Not a single human relationship between a black man and a black man or a black man and a black woman. The only positive images, in my opinion, are the images of the black boy and the black girl who rescue Sweetback by burning the police car. And these children—Where did they come from? Out of what experience? Out of what consciousness?—are neither explained pictorially nor presented as full characters.

But he doesn't show it in the movie. He doesn't show us how or when or why Sweetback changed. Will it be said that Sweetback changed when he was forced by circumstances to flail the cops? But Mr. Van Peebles, correcting Fanon, makes it clear that violence did not make Sweetback a man. After the cops were vanquished, poor helpless Moo Moo turns to Sweetback and asks: "Where we goin'?" Sweetback, "still his old noncommittal self," according to Mr. Van Peebles, answers: "Where'd you get that 'we shit!' " After this exchange, Sweetback, still in the grip of the whorehouse, goes home in daylight, as we have seen, and meekly submits to the waiting cops. It seems that Sweetback changed after he was rescued by two black children. But this change is not dramatized and we have to guess it rather than experience it. At a later point, after the abrupt conversion, Sweetback refuses to accompany a black motorcyclist, telling him to take poor Moo Moo, for "He's our future, Brer." Mr. Van Peebles apparently had some qualms about that future, for he tells us that two of the bodies that Beatle, the whorehouse owner, later views at the morgue are the black motorcyclist and probably Moo Moo. So much for the future of the Revolution.

There is no such ambiguity in *The Battle of Algiers*. The male hustler in that movie turns himself inside out, like a glove, like Malcolm, in fact. And, like Malcolm, he confronts his former companions with the errors of their way.

One wishes that Mr. Van Peebles had confronted his audience, not by preaching but by signifying and by using cinematic techniques to make people see. One wishes that he had confronted the black middle class by telling them how they could use their

No one, in this film, makes human contact with another human being. There is no communication, not even in the bed. The people are monads, despairing isolates imprisoned in the close bare white walls of private hells.

In Chicago recently, a young woman reproached Mr. Van Peebles for his negative vision of black womanhood. And he answered that she missed an essential shot, the shot of an old woman, a positive old woman, he said, who made her living by caring for foster children for the county. No doubt Mr. Van Peebles intended to present the woman as a positive character. But in fact and on film the woman is presented as a totally disoriented person who repeats the same words over and over, like a broken record: "I mighta had a Leroy once, but I don't rightly remember. They get so bad and so grown . . . I mighta had a Leroy once, but I don't remember. . . ." It is disquieting also to read Mr. Van Peebles' description of this "positive" character in the script: "Another ravaged face, a filthy basement, an old gnarled woman is cracking stringbeans into a beat-up pot and filthy half-naked children crawl around in the mess on the concrete."

Here, from Mr. Van Peebles' script, are descriptions of other black characters:

"A ravaged, roothless (sic) face bouncing around, a wino dancing on a corner in skid row for the tourists. . . ."

"Another face so heavily painted it looks like it's on its way to be in a Japanese play. . . ."

"A savage-faced woman yells into a mike then a funky dressing room where you can almost smell the armpits and hairgrease. . . ."

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SWEETBACK *Continued*

Savage-faced?

Surely, Mr. Van Peebles is putting us on. But no, he insists that he means it, every bit of it, and so we must take him seriously. It is fair, I think, to say that this alleged venture in the black aesthetic is quite possibly the most unremittingly bleak vision of the black experience ever filmed.

An even more graphic depiction of the bleakness of vision is the characterization of Sweetback. Cold, mute, wooden, he speaks only about 40 words in the entire film. "Sweetback," Mr. Van Peebles said, "practically never said a word, but that's just the way he was, I figured. I honestly never thought about it." On another occasion, Mr. Van Peebles told an interviewer: "I play Sweetback as a sort of brown Clint Eastwood." If you can't visualize the *brown* Clint Eastwood because you don't know who the white Clint Eastwood is, and if you can't imagine what possible relevance the white Clint Eastwood has to the *black* experience, then you will probably be helped by the explanation, advanced by some, that Sweetback doesn't speak because he is a man of action. But this explanation raises more questions than it answers. For Sweetback, despite the frenetic motion of the film, is the very opposite of the man of action. He doesn't grapple with life; he doesn't make decisions based on his ideas and desires. And, except for the chase sequence, he doesn't act. As conceived and played by Mr. Van Peebles, Sweetback passively and woodenly submits to women, men, situations, and life. Near the beginning of the film, two white policemen working on a murder case come to the whorehouse to get a black man, any black man, to pose as a suspect for one night to satisfy a public demand for action. They talk to Beatle, the owner, who argues back. The policemen lean on Beatle a little and he gives in, telling Sweetback *without explanation* to go with the police. *Without a word*, Sweetback meekly follows the policemen. This is no man of action, as Mr. Van Peebles admits in his summary: "Once upon a time a guy, a black guy, decided, well not really decided, he was more or less standing in the wrong place at the right time, to stand up for his rights. . . ."

There is another question, a more complex question, which we can only raise, without answering. Who is Sweetback? Is he a white stereotype, the Black Everyman Stud of the white man's dreams. Or is he a black fantasy figure, the internalized other of the white man's projection? Who is this man?

The question can be asked in another way. Is Mr. Van Peebles putting us on? Or does he accept the white stereotype of the black stud?

There is a third possibility: Mr. Van Peebles started out to make a fun thing, a satire probably, and somewhere along the way the game became serious and he had to back it with philosophy. It is entirely possible, indeed it is highly likely that all three possi-

his crotch. (For good-liberal or evil-conservative reasons.)"

To be sure, some black men take the opposite view, saying that the white myth is very serviceable, particularly in the seduction of white maidens, liberal and conservative, who want to know whether the myth is *really* true. After all, these brothers say, let's not destroy *all* the myths. But here again one must make a clear and black distinction between the white myth of the Savage Stud and the black tradition of spontaneous sexuality, a tradition which transcends the sex-is-sin madness of the Puritan dichotomy, taking its stand on the idea that bodies cannot be free and expressive in one act if they are not free and expressive in all acts. The distinction here is deep and subtle. And anyone who misses it and identifies black sexuality with white fantasies distorts the black experience and advances white interests.

There has been a great deal of discussion about the explicitness of the sexual scenes in the movie. I'm not at all sure what people mean when they deplore explicit sexual scenes. At any rate, the problem here is of another order. The sex in *Sweet Sweetback* is not explicit enough, it is not natural enough, *it is not black enough*. There is no passion in it, there is no joy in it, there is no soul in it. The sex in this "black" film is as cold and as white as snow—grim, manipulative, competitive, full of anxieties and hostilities. Perhaps the most astonishing aspect of this allegedly black film is that the only person showing giving herself to sex with the cool allegedly characteristic of the black aesthetic, the only person shown enjoying it, giving everything to it, holding nothing back, neither pride nor pretension, the only person shown climbing the mountain of passion, with every nerve and tendon taut, and then falling off the peak, turning loose the mind and the body, rolling her mind out, rolling her soul out—the only person shown doing this is not Sweetback the Sex Machine nor the black whores but the white female leader of the motorcycle gang. How does that black aesthetic grab you? You think perhaps I exaggerate? Then read the words Mr. Van Peebles wrote in the script: "Sweetback starts to work. Big Sadie's smirk disappears . . . In short, Sweetback begins to make a believer of her . . . This dance of life transcends all the frontiers of time, place, color . . . Sweetback stands up the winner. Big Sadie lays there almost beautiful and suddenly shy." Do I hear someone citing the spasticity of the black prostitute in the opening scene? But that's preposterous. Mr. Van Peebles' script and direction emphasize the difference between the two scenes. And, after all, one can hardly hold up the rape of a child by a 40-year-old prostitute as a paradigm of mature and expressive sexuality.

One expected more and better from a black director. One hoped that he would make visible for the first time the lushness, the beauty, and the incredible variety of black flesh. One hoped that he would be the first person to break through the sex-sin mind barrier and show all the leering cameras of the world how to present sex as the human sacrament it is.

putting us on? Or does he accept the white stereotype of the black stud?

There is a third possibility: Mr. Van Peebles started out to make a fun thing, a satire probably, and somewhere along the way the game became serious and he had to back it with philosophy. It is entirely possible, indeed it is highly likely that all three possibilities are true at the same time.

On another level, however, the question of artistic intentions is not decisive. For a film, like every other work of art, has an objective reality of its own. And the ideas men spin about their acts neither modify their internal logic nor their objective reality, nor their historical consequences. And it is clear beyond doubt that Sweetback is being presented by advertising and interviews not as irony but as truth, not as a caricature but as a black aesthetic.

What is clear also is that black audiences are taking Sweetback seriously as a sexual symbol. The word Sweetback has already passed into the lexicon of the ghetto, not as a synonym for a man who can take care of revolutionary business but as a synonym for a man who can take care of business in the bed.

This is a two-edged game that any number can play, for any number of reasons, as Clayton Riley very astutely observed in *The New York Times*. "Sweetback," he wrote, "is the ultimate sexualist, in whose seemingly vacant eyes and unrevealing mouth are written the protocols of American domestic colonialism. Here stands before us a triumph of the missionary purpose: a man whose only politics has been the politics of his body. And there rests his vulnerability. To the American White of liberal or conservative stripe, the Black man represents precisely the same thing: a male being whose existence and humanity share space in

One expected more and better from a black director. One hoped that he would make visible for the first time the lushness, the beauty, and the incredible variety of black flesh. One hoped that he would be the first person to break through the sex-sin mind barrier and show all the leering cameras of the world how to present sex as the human sacrament it is.

A long time ago, we watched *Carmen Jones* and other crap, and we snickered, saying, in superior tones, "The poor white boy, black sexuality threatens him, he doesn't know what to do with black bodies and white sheets." And we went out of hundreds of theaters, saying: "You wait. You wait until our man comes, and then you'll see bodies presented naturally. Then you'll see some passion. Then you'll see why the blues were written, why Bird Played and why Malindy Sang." Well, our man has come—you dig?—and we are still waiting—and I tell you, Baby, it is late, it is *very* late.

But let us take care here to preserve perspective. A mind, an artistic sensibility is at work here. Maybe Mr. Van Peebles is trying to tell us something. Maybe relations between black men and black women are so bad they cannot be shown in any other way. Certainly we must ponder the testimony of our leading writers, of the Van Peebleses and the Gordones, who have so far presented a picture of black sexuality as a vast and arid wasteland. I am inclined to believe that this testimony is neither persuasive nor accurate. But here, as elsewhere, we must wait on time, with a clear sense that time is running out.

One final word: It is disturbing to note Mr. Van Peebles' reliance on the emancipation orgasm. Sweetback saves himself three times by seduction: first, by using his sexual power to persuade

a black woman to free him of his handcuffs; secondly, by defeating Big Sadie in the sexual duel; thirdly, by raping or simulating the rape of a black sister at a rock festival. Now, with all due respects to the license of art, it is necessary to say frankly that nobody ever f***ed his way to freedom. And it is mischievous and reactionary finally for anyone to suggest to black people in 1971 that they are going to be able to sc**w their way across the Red Sea. F***ing will not set you free. If f***ing freed, black people would have celebrated the millennium 400 years ago.

*At least now we know what not
to do anymore.*

—Jean-Luc Godard

IF, AS I HAVE ARGUED, *Sweet Sweetback* is neither revolutionary nor black, it is by no means valueless. The film has, despite itself, a certain vulgar intensity, which testifies to the drive of the man behind it. One can go further and say that *Sweet Sweetback*, despite its monumental flaws, constitutes a negative landmark. And after it, we can never again see black people in films (noble, suffering, losing) in the same way.

It should be observed too that Mr. Van Peebles arbitrarily limited his artistic sights. He did not, he says, want to make a didactic film. He wanted to entertain. Moreover, he had, it seems, serious doubts about the cinematic literacy of the black population. He was making a film, he said, "for a sensibility that doesn't get to see twelve Visconti films a year." He had no illusions, he said, "about the attention level of people brainwashed to triviality." The film, he said, "couldn't be a didactic discourse which would end up playing (if I could find a distributor) to an empty theater except for 10 or 20 aware brothers who would pat me on the back and say 'Tell it like it is.' If Brer is bored, he's bored. One problem we must face squarely is that to attract the masses we must produce works that not only instruct but entertain."

We must, as he said, face that fact squarely. But we must also face the fact that the entertainment vs. instruction dichotomy was created expressly to make both entertainment and instruction impossible. And it is not true that one raises the consciousness of the people by appealing to them on the same level as CBS, NBC, and James Bond. Still and all, there is some truth in what he says, although one hopes, for the sake of black and revolutionary cinema, that it is not the whole truth. Nobody, as they say, ever went broke underestimating the intelligence of the American people, but then again nobody ever made a real classic, black or white, who did not realize that a real work of art creates an audience instead of seeking one, who did not realize that a real work of art teaches men what they feel and know but cannot say by drawing them toward values in which they will only later recognize their faces and their desires.

"I'm a bad winner, Man," Mr. Van Peebles has said. . . . "You got to MAKE yourself a winner. . . . So I made this movie to make money and to get to audiences by showing the other side of the situation for a change."

Mr. Van Peebles is a winner now. Like Sweetback, he has proven that you can mess with the man and escape, if not win. But his escape, like Sweetback's, is tinged with a thousand ironies; for, in the final analysis, he won or escaped, not on his own terms but on the man's terms, and in terms of the man's myths and philosophy (entertainment vs. instruction, and brilliant marketing techniques). And the white man, who will market anything if it entertains and sells, is going to imitate him, for his formula of sex-violence-degradation, liberally garnished with words like Bad and Ass and Motherf***er, is by no means new or revolutionary. But Mr. Van Peebles knows all that. He is wise in the ways of the streets and the banks, and he will survive. And the only question is whether he will prevail, that is to say, whether he will *really* win. This is a question of collective moment. For Geraldine is wrong. What you see is not what you get. What you see with white eyes keeps you from seeing and getting. By all this, we must understand, as we said in the beginning, that the central problem of the Black Revolution is the question of vision. And, as was said of old, where there is no vision, where there is *no seeing*, the people stumble into white pits and perish.